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# ART CRASHING

BY NANA ASFOUR

On a recent Saturday afternoon, the gallery assistant Katherine Siboni stepped out into the main room of the Greene Naftali space, in Chelsea, to survey the damage. For the past half hour, as we sat in the office area to discuss the current show by the Austrian collective Gelitin, the gallery had resounded with loud thumps, crashes, and laughter. Throughout that time neither Siboni nor Vera Alemani, one of the gallery directors who had joined us in the conversation, seemed to fret about the noises. They had gotten used to the clamor.



This was the gallery's second time hosting a Gelitin show. The four artists who make up Gelitin—they met in summer camp in 1978 (or so the story goes) and have been exhibiting worldwide since 1993—pride themselves on upending the public's expectations, trouncing on art's boundaries, and testing the patience of gallery dealers, employees, and critics. For their last show at Greene Naftali, they spent eight days in the gallery, blindfolded and skimpily dressed (or naked from the waist down), creating an impromptu sculpture with the help of friends and staff, which when finished looked like a fantastic, beautiful mess. The public watched the spontaneous creation from nearby bleachers. This time around, Gelitin made a series of sculptures—a plinth, a vase, a basket, a plush toy, a wooden circular concoction with balloons inside, and more—which visitors are encouraged to engage with at will. Each sculpture is erected on a rigged pedestal with a lever sticking out of one corner. Push the lever down and the sculpture comes flying off and crashing to the ground.

Like their Austrian predecessor Franz West, Gelitin ascribes to the idea that art should be fun and accessible, and sculptures should be objects for manipulation rather than contemplation. But whereas West invited visitors just to twirl or sit on his sculptures, Gelitin is offering the audience carte blanche to destroy and manhandle the artworks ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=\\_cM-1bZkFM0#!](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=_cM-1bZkFM0#!)), promoting utter disregard to the artists' original creation and intention. The Gelitin sculptures are, in a sense, an extension of West's idea of a portable sculpture, or "Adaptives," as he called them, with the lever rendering the works truly, magnificently, and marvellously—as they soar through the air—"portable." That these are sculptures standing on pedestals—which usually convey preciousness and value—makes it all the more thrilling to watch them hit the floor. The variety of the works and the range of materials, with each producing a different thud, mean that each piece projects its own particular optical delicacies

and aural surprises. Not every visitor gets that the sculptures are to be messed with—there are no signs or manuals guiding people—but for those who do, the show can be quite a blast.

By the time Siboni, a soft-spoken, twenty-seven-year-old graduate of Rhode Island School of Design, and I walked out into the gallery space, the usually placid and serene white box resembled a play den of overactive children. Some sculptures lay on the floor along with their debris, others had been tampered with or entirely displaced, and colorful plastic eggs were strewn everywhere. “Saturdays are usually the busiest days,” Siboni said, “but this is the most I’ve seen people move around and integrate sculptures.”

A recent visitor had scraped the colorful Plasticine blobby sculpture with his or her fingers, leaving broad marks on its side. “This was originally a head and used to have a nose but it was smashed in at the opening,” Siboni said. Among the other works that have incurred severe trashing since “The Fall Show,” as the artists have cleverly titled their exhibition, is the sculpture made of fiberglass, which has now been shattered into several chunks, its original shape—a large vase with a hand sticking out of the top—entirely unrecognizable.

Siboni and the other employees have to go around several times a day to take care of the sculptures. The gallery has not assigned this task to any one employee, and each decides to go out and prop up the works at his or her discretion. For the most part, staff members do their best to cobble back together the bits of a sculpture and reassemble it on its pedestal, but in a couple of cases, such as that of a colorful papier-mâché leg resting in a high-heeled silver sandal, they had to surgically intervene and bandage the severely mutilated work. “We asked the artists about that work and they said, yeah, just put some tape,” Alemani had told me earlier. The gallery employees can never tell in what state they are going to encounter the sculptures when they step out into the main room. “The other day, somebody took the shoe artwork and put it in a way that it looks like it was trying to get out of the door. She was tired of staying in this crazy place!” Alemani had said, bursting into laughter.

There is nothing to indicate to visitors that, when they are done playing with a sculpture, they ought to pick up the artwork and kindly reposition it. But I did spot several adults trying to be considerate. One woman struggled for some time to re-erect the unwieldy shoe sculpture. After a few attempts to make it stand, she gave up and left it lying on its side. As she did, an employee walked over to the heavy giant strawberry (made out of sewn plush fabric and bits of stuffed toys), which rests precariously on four thin strips, and lifted it into place. The woman turned to the strawberry, but then hesitated. “He just put it up,” she said, talking almost to herself. “I’m not going to knock it over—yet.”